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S. Korea Invites New Talks With North on Reunification

Move Offers Little Promise, Analysts Say

By Peter Maass
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SEOUL, June 3—The South Korean government, facing strong domestic pressure to initiate dialogue with North Korea, today made a high-profile call for the resumption of direct negotiations with the Communist North.

South Korean Prime Minister Lee Hyun Jae urged in a letter to his North Korean counterpart that high-ranking negotiating teams meet this month in Seoul or Pyongyang to discuss a range of issues, including North Korean participation in the Seoul Olympic Games and political and cultural exchanges. The last series of direct public talks between the rival governments was held in 1985.

North Korea, however, has so far declined even to accept the letter, according to a South Korean spokesman. It was delivered today to the Panmunjom truce village straddling the Demilitarized Zone, which has marked the north-south border since the end of the Korean War in 1953.

Diplomats here said it seems likely the North Koreans will reject the proposal because it does not appear to open the door for talks on two of Pyongyang's key demands: withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea and the cohosting of the Olympics by North Korea. The diplomats describe the South's proposal as extremely cautious, mainly aimed at clarifying existing points of South Korean policy.

The reunification issue has been adopted as a major protest theme by the country's relatively few student radicals, who call for intense contacts with the North and the withdrawal of U.S. troops from the South. Their sometimes violent demonstrations, which included an attack on the U.S. Embassy last month, have worried government officials who believe the agitation could further inflame public opinion on reunification.

Public debate on reunification was strongly discouraged before President Roh Tae Woo was inaugurated in February, but that is changing under the South's new climate of political openness. Opposition political parties, which now control the National Assembly, have led the way in criticizing the government's lack of initiative on the issue, and political analysts say Roh has been on the defensive both at home and with the Pyongyang regime, which has mounted its own propaganda offensive.

"I think the public at large expects less movement [on reunification] than the radical students," said one western diplomat. An Asian diplomat agreed, adding that the government must take some action "in order to isolate student protests from public support." Both diplomats said they believe the radicals will not be satisfied with the new initiative and will continue their protests.

The students and many dissident groups support North Korea's demand for cohosting the Olympics, arguing that this would pave the way for unification. North Korea, which plans to boycott the games despite the participation of its main allies, China and the Soviet Union, has rejected the International Olympic Committee's counteroffer that would allow them to host all or part of five of the 23 Olympic events.

Political analysts and diplomats say there are many reasons why Roh is apparently reluctant to make a bolder proposal to North Korea.

These observers believe that the ideologically rigid Pyongyang government is not ready for compromise with the South, and that Roh could lose political face and stir more domestic protests if he raises false hopes by starting a dialogue that is abruptly broken off.

In addition, analysts say, Roh may be able to deal from greater strength after the Olympics when the South presumably will have boosted its global stature and improved ties with Moscow and Beijing.

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